



bubaickuli

rebecca west

a conversation with
allison outhit

Bubaiskull, the name being taken from a tattoo of a skull with a boob for an eye, were a punk rock band from Halifax, Nova Scotia, fronted by Chris Logan on vocals and guitar, Allison Outhit on guitar and occasionally lead vocals, Adam Cavill on drums and Tim Stewart on bass. They were the first band to put out a 7" single on Cinnamon Toast Records (1992's *Insex*), and Outhit's following band Rebecca West continued to release records under the label. Bubaiskull were loud and aggressive, and where their music really shined was in their live shows (take their July 1st 1992 performance at the Double Deuce). Logan's rough voice and often slurring delivery make it almost impossible to not enjoy this band, and when Outhit takes the lead she's equally as in-your-face. They were a short-lived band but certainly notable within the Halifax scene.

After Bubaiskull, Allison Outhit went on to front the band **rebecca west** in 1994 which was notably more pop-oriented than Bubaiskull while still retaining edge. They were Dale Hussey (Merge, Slow Death) on drums, Allison Outhit on guitar and vocals, and Lukas Pearse (Les Gluetones, Horseshoes & Handgrenades) on bass. Rebecca West was named as a pseudonym after writer

Rebecca West whose name was also a pseudonym. When I asked Outhit about the choice for the band name, she said "it was a little bit of a nod to the 'Hey, you can't have a band with women in it and have it actually be called something that's not the woman's name'" and that "It was really a comment on what the music business was like at the time, where it was fucking impossible to be a woman playing in a band without that being the whole thing". The standout aspects of the band are Outhit's biting lyrics and passionate vocals, and never are those qualities more present than in songs like "Mystery Bird" from their 1996 EP *Six More Weeks Of Winter*, or in "Sick" of which there are two versions, one on the *Trim Crusts If Desired* Cinnamon Toast Records compilation (my personal favourite), and a more refined take on *Burners On*, the only full-length album from the band. *Burners On*, released in 1995, is an excellent record front to back with sweet pop melodies melding with tight drum and guitar playing, and a few stripped down cuts that are just as compelling as the others as Outhit's songwriting shines through. In my conversation with Allison Outhit, we talked about her music career and she provided interesting insights into the fans of her bands, the lack of diversity in the scene, NSCAD's influence, and the story behind the cover for *Burners On*.



Do you want to talk about your early years getting into the music industry? How did you get into it in the first place?

I started playing music when I was a kid, playing piano and that kind of thing, and started playing in bands when I was a teenager. I lived overseas until we moved back to Nova Scotia, to Halifax, when I was 17, and I started at university there. This was in 1981, and because I looked a bit different and had come from a major year, I had been living in Paris and the style and everything else about being a teenager there was very different than what happened and what it was like in Halifax at that time where you couldn't buy garlic in the grocery store [laugh]. It was really bananas. So I struggled at first to try to find people to be friends with, and then one day I was walking down the street and I saw this really cool looking guy, he was wearing a leather jacket and had kind of a punk looking hairdo and chains and whatnot. So I followed him like "Aha! Where is he going? I'll follow him" and he ended up going into this video arcade called Backstreets that was owned by a guy named Greg Clark, and I learned that day that that was the center of this little alternative punk rock scene in Halifax at the time, and so I met a whole bunch of people through that and started playing in bands pretty much

right away. I was also working out of the community radio station there, and so in the early eighties, I played in a couple of bands that were sort of notable and we went to a recording studio and had a track on a compilation and it was all very exciting. So that was the very, very earliest days of the Halifax scene or what was going to become the Halifax scene later. So by the time the nineties rolled around, I think I was already pretty much a veteran at that point.

Obviously you were in the band Bubaiskull before you were in Rebecca West, and Bubaiskull was very punk and intense. What made you switch to a little bit more of a pop oriented sound when you started fronting your own band?

[Laugh] well, partly because I got chunked out of Bubaiskull [laugh]. I really loved playing in that band. That was a scream. It was a lot of fun, and a lot of fun in a really difficult sort of way because at that time there was almost no music industry to speak of and Bubaiskull was sort of— we came out and had gotten to be a pretty popular band in Halifax before any of the Sloan stuff went down, and that was a little bit of a tough road because—[. . .]. There was no industry to speak of and nobody had a booking agent and all of that, and at the time too, I was going to law school and was a single mom at

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the same time, so I had a lot going on, but I would have stayed with that band, I think, for a time because I loved playing in that band and we were really popular and it was a great place to get out some aggression and to really fuck with people to be honest [laugh] that was quite enjoyable. As a band, even though we were quite hard and heavy and fast and sloppy and aggressive, we always played in cocktail attire. It was three guys and me and the men always wore suits and I always wore a cocktail dress, like we presented ourselves. We would often leave the stage covered in blood at the end of the night [laugh]. So that band broke up, slash, they kicked me out and so I decided to start my own thing, and I have always been a big fan of a certain kind of writing that is, I guess I would call it pop, but not in a dumb way. Kind of a more sensible, more clever or twisty or a

little bit outside, and that band, Rebecca West, I think there's a big difference between the two records that we made. The first one is— a lot of that was songs that I'd had kicking around that I wrote on an acoustic guitar and they're more simple and more pop sounding, and we made the record after only being together for about three or four months, and then by the time we came around to making the second record, which was an EP, we had been playing together for a lot longer and it was much more jam-y and a little bit more experimental and a little bit edgier and a little bit weirder and a little bit more outside than the first record.

I also have a very specific question here. I was looking at the old Bubaiskull site and it said "Allison would also like to randomly shout-out to Dr. Chris, who was our biggest,

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oddest fan. These days, he leads the field in geriatric mental health". Could you talk about who that fan was and also what your audience was like in general?

Oh my God, Bubaiskull had such a weird audience. Weird in the sense that although obviously we're associated with the Halifax scene and we're very much a part of that, we're not a grunge band. Grunge had not been invented when we started and we didn't sound like a grunge band, but that was kind of what happened in that town, was that became a very popular kind of style and way of sounding, which is fine. But we'd all played in punk bands in the eighties, all of us, and we were a little bit older than, I mean, obviously we were a lot older than the kids from Sloan [laugh], the kids from Sloan who are now like in their late forties, but they were kids at the time. We were a lot older and there was a gap there for hard music, and so the people who came to our shows, sometimes they were like skinhead punks, and sometimes they were like metal wizards [laugh] and basically anybody who really liked hard music, that's who wound up at the shows. But it was a very bizarre cross section of stuff, and Dr. Chris, whose last name I believe was McKnight, he came to all of our shows and was an unusual— one of these quiet sort of guys who was

always— I think he wore polo shirts and stuff [laugh] and you're like "Really? You love this band? Okay!" But he went on to have and is still having a great career.

I know that the Halifax scene was very open to everyone, like everyone could join in, but I was wondering, do you think there were any barriers people faced in terms of getting into the Halifax music scene in the first place? Because I noticed that with a lot of the main rock bands, there were very few nonwhite people in those bands. Yeah, I was going to say. Yeah, were there just not a lot of people of colour who wanted to be involved, or do you think there were other factors that led to that?

Yeah, of course Halifax at that time was a terribly racist place and it still has its moments for sure. Really that's it. I think it's true that where there were black musicians and people in the scene, like black folks who were in the scene who were interested in that music, they were certainly in there, there was no issues around that, and even going back to the early 1980s, in the full-on punk rock days, it was a small scene, but there were people in the scene who were black and who were every bit as outcast from their communities [laugh] as the

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rest of us were from ours. But the real issue there is that Halifax in Nova Scotia suffers from hundreds of years of deep segregation, deep, deep, deep segregation and racism and discrimination. By the early nineties, things hadn't improved enormously. Now, by that point, there were certainly some hip hop acts that had started to come up and that had racialized people in them, and they were very welcome and they played shows and we played shows with them, like Bubaisskull played with Hip Club Groove and whatever. There was space there. But that said, there was no sense that, “Hey, we should maybe actually do something to create a welcoming space for black artists on these stages”. That wasn't part of the thinking. I think at the time it was very much like, “Hey, everyone is welcome to come into our space” [laugh] and we understand in terms of anti-racism, I think we, I certainly, and others, understand it very differently. It's not necessarily an anti-racist gesture

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to say “You are welcome into my space” but it is definitely an anti-racist gesture to say, “What can I do to make a space for you that you have power over, that you are in control of, that you make the creative decisions, that’s for you, and if you want to invite me into that space, great, but it’s your space”. That was the missing piece. I think it’s better now, but it’s still not the greatest.


I was also wondering about the visual aspect of both Bubaiskull and Rebecca West, especially Bubaiskull. You guys had very striking imagery with your albums that felt very of the time. I was wondering, where did the inspiration come from and what was the relationship between visual artists and musicians during that time?

Well, that's an excellent question. So the artist for all Bubaiskull stuff was our drummer, Adam Cavill, who'd been to art school and who was a graphic designer, and that was his sensibility all the way. Bearing in mind that he came up in the eighties as a punk rock sort of guy, and so he was really interested in this disturbing, cartoonish kind of imagery. I mean, the name of the band Bubaiskull comes from— so Chris, Tim and Adam used to all live together in Montreal in a terrible apartment that never, ever got cleaned, and they started the band and called it Bubaiskull. It was based on a tattoo that they saw [laugh] it's like the worst tattoo in the world, which was a skull but instead of an eye it had a boob, [laugh] like a breast, which they thought was hilarious, and it is pretty funny. So all of the graphic stuff was all Adam's sensibility, and he's still a working artist. So that was great. And likewise, the artwork for Rebecca West, we did it collaboratively, but for example, on the first record for *Burners On*, that package was made out of some photographs that Lukas, the bass player, had found in his basement, and it was a

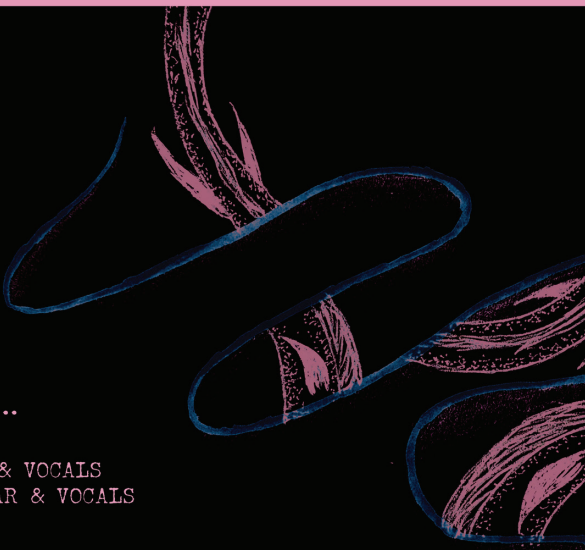
photo album that somebody had lost years and years earlier, and they were all Polaroids and something had happened to them just from sitting in this damp, yucky basement. They had started to corrode in a way that I thought was visually really interesting, and I really liked the idea of this found album of these people, like who knows who they are, and the corrosion worked in this really interesting and disturbing way. But Lukas is also an artist and he comes from a line of artists, and in fact, I'm pretty sure his dad taught at NSCAD, and so the interesting thing in your question there is that the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in the early 1970s, it was known as a really avant-garde kind of school in the world and it was avant-garde

for avant-garde
art forms like media
arts, which were very new at that
time, so video and audio art and video and
audio installations and things like that.
NSCAD was absolutely a pioneer in that
kind of work, and so in the mid-late seven-
ties, there were bands that came up, NSCAD
would throw up a band from time to time, a
musician from time to time, and at that time,
also into the early eighties, that was one of
the few places that you could actually go and
play if you were an alternative band, was
in the cafeteria at NSCAD. We all famously

remember the first
time Sonic Youth came to play
in Halifax, which I think it was in maybe 1986
or '87, something like that. I was definitely
at that show, as were, if you believe them,
3000 people [laugh] at a show that really
there were only about 150 people at. So there
was always a very close connection between
NSCAD as an institution with all of its
students interested



in doing
things, and they had facilities, they had video editing suites and little sound recording studios and things like that, so there was always a connection between NSCAD the alternative music scene.



bubaiskull were...

adam cavill DRUMS

chris logan GUITAR & VOCALS

allison outhit GUITAR & VOCALS

tim stewart BASS

(and briefly)

tim brennan GUITAR

brock caldwell DRUMS

rebecca west were...

dale hussey DRUMS

allison outhit GUITAR & VOCALS

lukas pearse BASS

(and briefly)

stephen outhit BASS